

## **A LITTLE ABOUT PEASE GREETERS**

Three years ago in early 2006 members of the Seacoast Detachment, #394, Marine Corps League met their first flight of Veterans returning from the Near East at the Pease Air Terminal in Portsmouth, NH. For the first few flights there were only five or six Marines and Pease Development Authority workers greeting the troops in a rather sterile, austere and cavernous room.

Pease is attractive to the airlines due to less air traffic, a long runway, fast refueling capacity, lower landing fees, and a reputation for a friendly reception. Iceland is the next to last stop in the long journey home for the homecoming troops, but that isn't home.

On arriving at Pease, the homecoming troops enjoy expedited processing through U. S. Customs and then set foot on American soil for the first time in many months. These men and women, usually about one hundred and twenty on each flight, are now home from the wars. All veterans, Army, Air Force, Navy and Marines receive the same spirited welcome from the Greeters. The Greeters never know in advance which service group is landing.

The initially subdued greetings have been replaced with rather boisterous welcomes. The Greeters are proud of these veterans and give the troops prolonged and hearty applause, sincere handshakes and hugs and expressions of "Welcome home, Welcome to New Hampshire and Thanks for a job well done." Smiles and sometimes shyness replace the initial looks of surprise on the faces of these heroes who are not expecting any greeting.

Soon these veterans move on through the gauntlet of well-wishers to enjoy hot coffee, twelve dozen doughnuts, cakes, ice cream, cookies, apples. Sometimes those arriving in the afternoon or early evening get pizzas and sandwiches as well. No one misses out on the food and there are no leftovers! **Panera Bread, Joe's Meat Market, Wal-Mart, Hannaford's, Shaw's, Friendly's** and others have supplied sandwiches, chili, chowdah or pastries to the troops.

Initially cell phones were freely offered by the Greeters for the troops to call home with news of their safe arrival but that feature has also been improved. The Cell phones have been replaced with a bank of eighteen permanently mounted phones to be used free of charge exclusively for the veterans, courtesy of **Whaleback Systems**, a highly respected company located in the Pease Development Estate. The dedicated telephone room has been named **Malinda's Room** after the wife of **Captain Smith, USMC**, who passed through Pease on his way to Iraq and who called his wife while here.

At the outset there were no flags, no signs, no ceremony, but the Seacoast Marines were new at this greeting thing and soon made changes.

Real changes have evolved. Now there are colorful service flags hanging in the ready room that were donated by Veterans Service Groups (DAV, VFW, AL) as well as a large American Flag and a New Hampshire State flag adding color and meaning to **Welcome Home**. The first flag to fly over Guadalcanal in 1942 has been raised in tribute over the Heroes' Walk. We are developing the **Hall of Flags** as more flags are donated.

The Greeters Group has grown from 10 or 12 men and women to over thirteen hundred veterans, friends and youths with most veterans wearing, if not their uniforms then at least, their hats. All offer their thanks and greetings for these heroes. The Marines are joined in these greetings by the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Disabled American Veterans, the American Legion, the Knights of Columbus, the Masons, the Red Hat Ladies, The Freeport Ladies, civic, business and fraternal groups all showing their admiration and support.

There are toiletries such as pre-pasted toothbrushes, hair brushes, razors, after shave lotion, moistened towelettes offered to all so that these guys and gals may freshen up. The rest rooms are in continuous use.

To cover the costs of food and beverages, the **PEASE GREETERS FUND**, a nonprofit organization, has been established to collect and distribute monies to be used for these returning heroes. The food costs run about \$300.00 each visit, but a donation of any amount will be accepted and put to good use.

Those wishing to make a contribution should make the check payable to **The Pease Greeters Fund**, care of Ed Johnson, P.O. Box 178, Rye Beach, NH 03871-0178. .What started as a local movement has grown into nationwide recognition. We have received over 825 donations, large and small, from all over the country. People want to stand with us and show their respect and love.

The Greeters have not missed a flight since their inception, now exceeding 225 visit with close to thirty thousand troops having passed through the terminal.

Then, before boarding, there is a brief ceremony that climaxes with the Greeters standing in formation in front of the young warriors, and rendering a hand salute with the solemn words:

**We, the old Warriors salute you, the young Warriors**

Then the troops are gone. Gone home to their families. Or gone off to war. But they leave having been shown the respect of a grateful nation by the **PEASE FAMILY of GREETERS**. We are the **Surrogate Family of America**. We stand for the loved ones who cannot be there.